

DECORATIVE SYSTEM COMPOSITE AND METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The instant application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/442,944, filed January 27, 2003, and U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/534,486, filed January 6, 2004, the entire specifications of both of which are expressly incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention generally relates to thermoforming of plastic articles, and more particularly to new and improved decorative laminate composites and methods for making the same.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] In an effort to decrease automobile weight and increase energy efficiency, many automobile manufacturers are employing automobile parts that are fabricated from lightweight materials, such as plastic materials (e.g., thermoplastics and thermosets). One such class of plastic materials is generally known as thermoplastic polyolefins (TPO's), such as various grades of polyethylene or polypropylene. Another such class would consist of ABS or ABS/polycarbonate blends.

[0004] Some of these parts are produced by thermoforming, e.g., vacuum forming, which is generally defined as a process wherein a heated, and thus softened, amount of plastic material (typically in the form of a sheet) is molded into the desired shape through vacuum suction of the warmed plastic onto a pre-formed mold.

[0005] Thermoforming can be used for many thicknesses of plastic sheets and can provide great strength in its finished moldings. Fairly complex moldings can be achieved with thermoforming. However, these plastic materials do not typically have a desirable finish (or prematurely lose that finish when exposed to the elements) for use with automotive applications. Furthermore, these plastic materials do not possess sufficient wall thickness. For example, certain conventional automotive components are thermoformed, trimmed and then injection molded.

[0006] Various approaches have been taken to providing a high quality automotive paint-like finish to lightweight parts, such as molded plastic parts. One approach that has received considerable attention uses a surfacing film system having a decorative layer (e.g., a preformed colorant or paint-like film) that can be used to impart a surface effect (e.g., color or other visual pattern) to a thermoformed part. These surfacing film systems are generally referred to as paint or color-containing films. An example of this process can be found in U.S. Patent No. 5,215,826 to Shimanski et al., the entire specification of which is expressly incorporated herein by reference.

[0007] By way of a non-limiting example, paint or color-containing films, especially those used in producing colored automotive components, can be comprised of a decorative layer (e.g., paint, ink, or other colorant), an optional adhesive layer (e.g., a heat-activated adhesive), a preferably scratch resistant optional top clear coat layer, and an optional removable casting base (e.g., a polyester-based sheet). These types of paint or color-containing films are readily commercially available from Avery Dennison Corp. (Pasadena, California), Soliant L.L.C. (Lancaster, South Carolina) and Dorrie International (Farmington Hills, Michigan). These paint or color-containing films are generally available in a wide range of

colors, including solid metallic colors, and are primarily used in a number of automotive applications.

[0008] Additionally, automotive component manufacturers have also used other types of color-containing films, such as mold-in-color (MIC) films. One particular MIC film currently being used is a MIC ionomer film readily commercially available from Mayco Plastics, Inc. (Sterling Heights, Michigan) under the trade name FORMION. The MIC ionomer film typically consists of four discrete layers with a back molded (e.g., injection molded) thermoplastic polyolefin substrate. The layers typically consist of a clear ionomer layer, a colored ionomer layer, an adhesive layer, and a backing layer.

[0009] Regardless of the type of paint or color-containing film used, it is sometimes necessary to employ a removable release or masking layer to protect the surface of the component to be thermoformed, due in part to the particular processing parameters encountered during the thermoforming process. This is especially true of thick sheet polyolefin thermoforming. Thick sheet thermoforming typically employs sheets having a thickness in the range of about 0.06 to about 0.5 inches.

[0010] Typically, when the thermoforming process is completed, the component is removed from the mold surface and the release layer is then removed. Alternatively, the release layer can be left in place, for example, until the component reaches its final destination, whereupon the release layer can then be removed, thus protecting the outer surface of the component.

[0011] Unfortunately, many conventional release layer materials have several significant disadvantages, such as relatively low tensile strength, especially at the elevated temperatures typically associated with conventional thermoforming techniques, as well as

undesirable bag/sag/drape control characteristics. Accordingly, when the TPO substrate is heated, regardless of whether a paint or color-containing film is present or not, the release layer exhibits significant bag/sag/drape control problems which are manifested in the TPO substrate billowing out from the frame bracket. When the TPO substrate is removed from the oven and placed over the mold face, the draping TPO material tends to gather and clump when the suction force is applied to the mold. Thus, the finished thermoformed part has significant surface irregularities and cannot be used, thus raising production costs and causing production delays.

[0012] Accordingly, there exists a need for new and improved support film systems, especially for use with paint or color-containing films, wherein the support film systems exhibit relatively high tensile strength, especially at the elevated temperatures typically associated with conventional thermoforming techniques, as well as relatively good bag/sag/drape control characteristics. Additionally, these new and improved support film systems should preserve, or at least prevent the loss of gloss characteristics of the paints films, if used, or aid in the thermoformability of the underlying plastic substrates, if paint or color-containing films are not used.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0013] In accordance with the general teachings of the present invention, new and improved decorative laminate composites and methods for forming the same are provided. New and improved support film systems are employed to form the decorative laminate composites. These support film systems of the present invention possess enhanced tensile strength, especially at elevated temperatures typically encountered during thermoforming processes. Additionally, these support film systems preserve, or at least prevent the loss of gloss characteristics of the

paint or color-containing films, if used, or aid in the thermoformability of the underlying plastic substrates, if paint or color-containing films are not used.

[0014] By way of a non-limiting example, the support films preferably possess a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pounds per linear inch (pli) at about 300°F. These support films can be used in conjunction with various optional release films. The support films of the present invention are particularly suitable for use with surfacing film systems, such as but not limited to various paint or color-containing films. The support films of the present invention are also especially suitable for use in thermoforming operations to produce contoured automotive components for interior and/or exterior applications. Because of the enhanced properties of the support film of the present invention, the support films preferably exhibit enhanced bag/sag/drape control characteristics. Additionally, the support films of the present invention preferably produce components that have enhanced gloss characteristics, as compared to conventional production methods.

[0015] In accordance with a first embodiment of the present invention, a thermoformable support film is provided, wherein the support film is comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F, wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support a polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process.

[0016] In accordance with a second embodiment of the present invention, a laminate system is provided, comprising: (1) a thermoformable support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; and (2) a polymeric substrate in abutting relationship with the support film; wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support the polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process.

[0017] In accordance with a third embodiment of the present invention, a support film system is provided, comprising: (1) a thermoformable support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; and (2) a release layer in abutting relationship with the support film; wherein the release layer is operable to releasably adhere to a polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process; wherein the support film is operable to support the polymeric substrate during the thermoforming process.

[0018] In accordance with a fourth embodiment of the present invention, a thermoformable support film system is provided, wherein the support film is comprised of: (1) a support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F, wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support a polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process; and (2) a paint or color-containing film system in abutting relationship with the support film; wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to the paint or color-containing film system.

[0019] In accordance with a fifth embodiment of the present invention, a thermoformable support film system is provided, wherein the support film is comprised of: (1) a support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F, wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support a polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process; (2) a paint or color-containing film system in abutting relationship with the support film; and (3) an adhesive film system in abutting relationship with the paint or color-containing film system; wherein the support film is operable to adhere to the paint or color-containing film system.

[0020] In accordance with a sixth embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a support film system is provided, comprising: (1) providing a thermoformable

support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; and (2) providing a release layer in abutting relationship with the support film; wherein the release layer is operable to releasably adhere to a polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process; wherein the support film is operable to support the polymeric substrate during the thermoforming process.

[0021] In accordance with a seventh embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a laminate system is provided, comprising: (1) providing a thermoformable support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; and (2) providing a polymeric substrate in abutting relationship with the support film; wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support the polymeric substrate during a thermoforming process.

[0022] In accordance with an eighth embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a laminate system is provided, comprising: (1) providing a thermoformable support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; (2) providing a release layer in abutting relationship with the support film; (3) providing a surfacing film system in abutting relationship with the release layer; and (4) providing a polymeric substrate in abutting relationship with the surfacing film system; wherein the release layer is operable to releasably adhere to the surfacing film system during the thermoforming process; wherein the support film is operable to support the polymeric substrate during the thermoforming process.

[0023] In accordance with a ninth embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a support film system is provided, comprising: (1) providing a thermoformable support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; and

(2) providing a paint or color-containing film system in abutting relationship with the support film; wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support the paint or color-containing film system during a thermoforming process.

[0024] In accordance with a tenth embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a support film system is provided, comprising: (1) providing a thermoformable support film comprised of a material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F; (2) providing a paint or color-containing film system in abutting relationship with the support film; and (3) providing an adhesive film system in abutting relationship with the paint or color-containing film system; wherein the support film is operable to releasably adhere to and support the paint or color-containing film system during a thermoforming process.

[0025] A further understanding of the present invention will be had in view of the description of the drawings and detailed description of the invention, when viewed in conjunction with the subjoined claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0026] Figure 1 is a partial sectional view of a support film, in accordance with the general teachings of the present invention;

[0027] Figure 2 is a partial sectional view of the support film shown in Fig. 1 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with the general teachings of the present invention;

[0028] Figure 2A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with the general teachings of the present invention;

[0029] Figure 3 is a partial sectional view of the support film shown in Figs. 1 and 2 being removed from the substrate, in accordance with the general teachings of the present invention;

[0030] Figure 4 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film, in accordance with a first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0031] Figure 5 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Fig. 4 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0032] Figure 5A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0033] Figure 6 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Figs. 4 and 5 being removed from the substrate, in accordance with a first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0034] Figure 7 is a partial sectional view of a support film and a release film, in accordance with a second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0035] Figure 8 is a partial sectional view of the support film and release film shown in Fig. 7 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0036] Figure 8A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a release film and a substrate, in accordance with a second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0037] Figure 9 is a partial sectional view of the support film and release film shown in Figs. 7 and 8 being removed from the substrate, in accordance with a second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0038] Figure 10 is a partial sectional view of a support film in abutting relationship with an alternative release film, in accordance with a third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0039] Figure 11 is a partial sectional view of the support film and alternative release film shown in Fig. 10 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0040] Figure 11A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with an alternative release film and a substrate, in accordance with a third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0041] Figure 12 is a partial sectional view of the support film and alternative release film shown in Figs. 10 and 11 being removed from the substrate, in accordance with a third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0042] Figure 13 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film and a release film, in accordance with a fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0043] Figure 14 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film and release film shown in Fig. 13 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0044] Figure 14A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a release film and a substrate, in accordance with a fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0045] Figure 15 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film and release film shown in Figs. 13 and 14 being removed from the substrate, in accordance with a fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0046] Figure 16 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film and an alternative release film, in accordance with a fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0047] Figure 17 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film and alternative release film shown in Fig. 16 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0048] Figure 17A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with an alternative release film and a substrate, in accordance with a fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0049] Figure 18 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film and alternative release film shown in Figs. 16 and 17 being removed from the substrate, in accordance with a fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0050] Figure 19 is a partial sectional view of a support film and a surfacing film in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0051] Figure 19A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a surfacing film and a substrate, in accordance with a sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0052] Figure 20 is a partial sectional view of the support film shown in Fig. 19 being removed from the surfacing film, in accordance with a sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0053] Figure 21 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film and a surfacing film in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0054] Figure 21A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a surfacing film and a substrate, in accordance with a seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0055] Figure 22 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Fig. 21 being removed from the surfacing film, in accordance with a seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0056] Figure 23 is a partial sectional view of a support film, a release film, and a surfacing film in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with an eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0057] Figure 23A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a release film and a substrate, in accordance with an eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0058] Figure 24 is a partial sectional view of the support film and release film shown in Fig. 23 being removed from the surfacing film, in accordance with an eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0059] Figure 25 is a partial sectional view of a support film, an alternative release film, and a surfacing film in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0060] Figure 25A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with an alternative release film and a substrate, in accordance with a ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0061] Figure 26 is a partial sectional view of the support film and alternative release film shown in Fig. 25 being removed from the surfacing film, in accordance with a ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0062] Figure 27 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film, a release film, and a surfacing film in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a tenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0063] Figure 27A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a release film and a substrate, in accordance with a tenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0064] Figure 28 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film and release film shown in Fig. 27 being removed from the surfacing film, in accordance with a tenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0065] Figure 29 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film, an alternative release film, and a surfacing film in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with an eleventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0066] Figure 29A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with an alternative release film and a substrate, in accordance with an eleventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0067] Figure 30 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film and alternative release film shown in Fig. 29 being removed from the surfacing film, in accordance with an eleventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0068] Figure 31 is a partial sectional view of a thermoplastic polyolefin primer film, in accordance with the prior art;

[0069] Figure 32 is a partial sectional view of the thermoplastic polyolefin primer film shown in Fig. 31 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with the prior art;

[0070] Figure 33 is a partial sectional view of a support film and the thermoplastic polyolefin primer film shown in Figs. 31 and 32 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a twelfth embodiment of the present invention;

[0071] Figure 33A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a primer film and a substrate, in accordance with a twelfth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0072] Figure 34 is a partial sectional view of the support film being removed from the thermoplastic polyolefin primer film shown in Figs. 31-33, in accordance with an twelfth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0073] Figure 35 is a partial sectional view of an alternative support film and the thermoplastic polyolefin primer film shown in Figs. 31-33 in abutting relationship with a substrate, in accordance with a thirteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0074] Figure 35A is a partial sectional view of two support films in abutting relationship with a primer film and a substrate, in accordance with a second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0075] Figure 36 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Fig. 35 being removed from the thermoplastic polyolefin primer film shown in Figs. 31-35, in accordance with a thirteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0076] Figure 37 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0077] Figure 37A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0078] Figure 38 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 37 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0079] Figure 39 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 38 to the form of the component, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0080] Figure 40 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 38-39 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0081] Figure 41 is a partial sectional view of the support film shown in Figs. 38-40 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0082] Figure 42 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0083] Figure 42A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0084] Figure 43 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 42 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0085] Figure 44 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 43 to the form of the component, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0086] Figure 45 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 43-44 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0087] Figure 46 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Figs. 43-45 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the

requisite dimensions, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0088] Figure 47 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film/release film system is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0089] Figure 47A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0090] Figure 48 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 47 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0091] Figure 49 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 48 to the form of the component, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0092] Figure 50 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/release film system/substrate portion shown in Figs. 48-49 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0093] Figure 51 is a partial sectional view of the support film/release film system shown in Figs. 48-50 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0094] Figure 52 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film/alternative release film system is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0095] Figure 52A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0096] Figure 53 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/alternative release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 52 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0097] Figure 54 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/alternative release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 53 to the form of the component, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0098] Figure 55 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/alternative release film system/substrate portion shown in Figs. 53-54 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[0099] Figure 56 is a partial sectional view of the support film/alternative release film system shown in Figs. 53-55 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00100] Figure 57 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film/release film system is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00101] Figure 57A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00102] Figure 58 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 57 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00103] Figure 59 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 58 to the form of the component, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00104] Figure 60 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/release film system/substrate portion shown in Figs. 58-59 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00105] Figure 61 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/release film system shown in Figs. 58-60 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00106] Figure 62 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film/alternative release film system is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00107] Figure 62A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional alternative second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00108] Figure 63 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 62 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00109] Figure 64 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 63 to the form of the component, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00110] Figure 65 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/alternative release film system/substrate portion shown in Figs. 63-64 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00111] Figure 66 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/alternative release film system shown in Figs. 63-65 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00112] Figure 67 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a thermoplastic polyolefin primer film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with the prior art;

[00113] Figure 68 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated primer film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 67 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with the prior art;

[00114] Figure 69 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated primer film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 68 to the form of the component, in accordance with the prior art;

[00115] Figure 70 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated primer film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 68-69 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with the prior art;

[00116] Figure 71 is a partial sectional view of the component comprised of the primer film/substrate system shown in Figs. 68-70 after being trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with the prior art;

[00117] Figure 72 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a thermoplastic polyolefin primer film and a support film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00118] Figure 72A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00119] Figure 73 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/primer film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 72 is heated prior to

shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00120] Figure 74 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/primer film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 73 to the form of the component, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00121] Figure 75 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/primer film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 73-74 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00122] Figure 76 is a partial sectional view of the support film shown in Figs. 73-75 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00123] Figure 77 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a thermoplastic polyolefin primer film and an alternative support film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00124] Figure 77A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00125] Figure 78 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/primer film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 77 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00126] Figure 79 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/primer film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 78 to the form of the component, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00127] Figure 80 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/primer film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 78-79 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00128] Figure 81 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Figs. 78-80 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00129] Figure 82 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film and a release film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00130] Figure 82A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00131] Figure 83 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 82 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00132] Figure 84 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 83 to the form of the component, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00133] Figure 85 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 83-84 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00134] Figure 86 is a partial sectional view of the support film/release layer system shown in Figs. 83-85 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00135] Figure 87 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film and an alternative release film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00136] Figure 87A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00137] Figure 88 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/alternative release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 87 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00138] Figure 89 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/alternative release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 88 to the form

of the component, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00139] Figure 90 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the laminated system support film/alternative release film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 88-89 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00140] Figure 91 is a partial sectional view of the support film/alternative release layer system shown in Figs. 88-90 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00141] Figure 92 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film and a release film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00142] Figure 92A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00143] Figure 93 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 92 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00144] Figure 94 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 93 to the form

of the component, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00145] Figure 95 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/release film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 93-94 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00146] Figure 96 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/release layer system shown in Figs. 92-95 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00147] Figure 97 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film and an alternative release film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00148] Figure 97A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00149] Figure 98 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 97 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00150] Figure 99 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 98

to the form of the component, in accordance with a twenty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00151] Figure 100 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 98-99 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00152] Figure 101 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/alternative release layer system shown in Figs. 98-100 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-fifth embodiment of the present invention;

[00153] Figure 102 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00154] Figure 102A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00155] Figure 103 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 102 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00156] Figure 104 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 103 to the form

of the component, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00157] Figure 105 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 103-104 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00158] Figure 106 is a partial sectional view of the support film shown in Figs. 103-105 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00159] Figure 107 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00160] Figure 107A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00161] Figure 108 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 107 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00162] Figure 109 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 108 to the form of the component, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00163] Figure 110 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 108-109 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00164] Figure 111 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film shown in Figs. 108-110 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00165] Figure 112 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film/release film system and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00166] Figure 112A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00167] Figure 113 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 112 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00168] Figure 114 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 113 to the form of the component, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00169] Figure 115 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 113-114 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00170] Figure 116 is a partial sectional view of the support film/release film system shown in Figs. 113-115 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00171] Figure 117 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film/alternative release film system and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00172] Figure 117A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00173] Figure 118 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 117 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00174] Figure 119 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 118 to the form of the component, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00175] Figure 120 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 118-119 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00176] Figure 121 is a partial sectional view of the support film/alternative release film system shown in Figs. 118-120 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00177] Figure 122 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film/release film system and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirtieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00178] Figure 122A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirtieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00179] Figure 123 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 122 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirtieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00180] Figure 124 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 123 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirtieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00181] Figure 125 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 123-124 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirtieth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00182] Figure 126 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/release film system shown in Figs. 123-125 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00183] Figure 127 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film/alternative release film system and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00184] Figure 127A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00185] Figure 128 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 127 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00186] Figure 129 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 128 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00187] Figure 130 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 128-129 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00188] Figure 131 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/alternative release film system shown in Figs. 128-130 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00189] Figure 132 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film, a release film, and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00190] Figure 132A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00191] Figure 133 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 132 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00192] Figure 134 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 133 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00193] Figure 135 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 133-134 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00194] Figure 136 is a partial sectional view of the support film/release film system shown in Figs. 133-135 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00195] Figure 137 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein a support film, an alternative release film, and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00196] Figure 137A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00197] Figure 138 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 137 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00198] Figure 139 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 138 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00199] Figure 140 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 138-139 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00200] Figure 141 is a partial sectional view of the support film/alternative release film system shown in Figs. 138-140 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00201] Figure 142 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film, a release film, and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00202] Figure 142A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00203] Figure 143 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 142 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00204] Figure 144 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 143 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00205] Figure 145 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 143-144 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00206] Figure 146 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/release film system shown in Figs. 143-145 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00207] Figure 147 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an alternative support film, an alternative release film, and a surfacing film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00208] Figure 147A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second alternative support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00209] Figure 148 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 147 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00210] Figure 149 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 148 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00211] Figure 150 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated alternative support film/alternative release film/surfacing film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 148-149 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00212] Figure 151 is a partial sectional view of the alternative support film/alternative release film system shown in Figs. 148-150 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00213] Figure 152 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an adhesive film, a clear coat/base coat film, and a combined release film/support film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00214] Figure 152A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00215] Figure 153 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated adhesive film/clear coat/base coat film/combined release film/support film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 152 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00216] Figure 154 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated adhesive film/clear coat/base coat film/ combined release film/support film system/substrate portion shown in Fig. 153 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00217] Figure 155 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated adhesive film/clear coat/base coat film/combined release film/support film system/substrate portion shown in Figs. 153-154 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00218] Figure 156 is a partial sectional view of the combined release film/support film system shown in Figs. 153-155 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00219] Figure 157 is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an adhesive film, a clear coat/base coat film, a release film, and a support film are applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00220] Figure 157A is a partial schematic view of a lamination process wherein an optional second support film is applied to an extruded substrate, in accordance with a thirty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00221] Figure 158 is a partial schematic view of a thermoforming process wherein the laminated adhesive film/clear coat/base coat film/release film/support film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 157 is heated prior to shaping into the form of a component, in accordance with a thirty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00222] Figure 159 is a partial sectional view of a mold surface being used to shape the laminated adhesive film/clear coat/base coat film/ release film/support film/substrate portion shown in Fig. 158 to the form of the component, in accordance with a thirty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00223] Figure 160 is a partial sectional view of the formed component comprised of the shaped laminated adhesive film/clear coat/base coat film/release film/support film/substrate portion shown in Figs. 158-159 once it has been removed from the mold surface, in accordance with a thirty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00224] Figure 161 is a partial sectional view of the release film/support film system shown in Figs. 158-160 being removed from the formed component which has been trimmed to the requisite dimensions, in accordance with a thirty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00225] Figure 162 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a surfacing film/substrate system heated at 360°F, in accordance with the prior art;

[00226] Figure 163 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a release film/surfacing film/substrate system heated at 360°F, in accordance with the prior art;

[00227] Figure 164 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a surfacing film/substrate system heated at 340°F, in accordance with the prior art;

[00228] Figure 165 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a release film/surfacing film/substrate system heated at 340°F, in accordance with the prior art;

[00229] Figure 166 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a support film/release film system/surfacing film/substrate system heated at 360°F, in accordance with a thirty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00230] Figure 167 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate system heated at 360°F, in accordance with a thirty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention;

[00231] Figure 168 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a support film/release film system/surfacing film/substrate system heated at 340°F, in accordance with a fortieth alternative embodiment of the present invention; and

[00232] Figure 169 is a partial sectional view illustrating the drape characteristic of a support film/release film/surfacing film/substrate system heated at 360°F, in accordance with a forty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention.

[00233] The same reference numerals refer to the same parts throughout the various Figures.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[00234] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, a support film 10 is provided, as generally shown in Fig. 1. Support film 10 is preferably thermoformable, in that it is suitable for use with conventional thermoforming techniques. In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, support film 10 is preferably comprised of a polymeric material having a tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F, more preferably in the range of greater than 0.5 pli to about 1.6 pli or greater at 300°F, and still more preferably in the range of about 0.75 pli to about 1.0 pli or greater.

[00235] By way of a non-limiting example, support film 10 of the present invention will be especially useful for the production of thermoformed articles, for example, interior/exterior automobile components, such as body panels. By way of another non-limiting example, support film 10 of the present invention will be especially useful for the production of contoured articles, for example, interior/exterior automobile components, such as body panels.

[00236] By way of a non-limiting example, support film 10 should preferably possess suitable chemical and physical properties, including enhanced sag/bag/drape control characteristics, over the entire spectrum of process parameters encountered with conventional thermoforming techniques, e.g., the temperatures typically used in thermoforming techniques.

[00237] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, support film 10 preferably has a thickness in the range of about 0.00025 inches to about 0.005 inches, more preferably a thickness in the range of about 0.00075 inches to about 0.00125 inches, and still more preferably a thickness of about 0.001 inches. However, it should be appreciated that support films having a thickness outside of these ranges can be used in the practice of the present invention.

[00238] By way of a non-limiting example, support film 10 is preferably comprised of fluoropolymer materials, such as but not limited to polyvinyl fluoride (PVF). In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the PVF material is comprised of TEDLAR SP, a PVF material readily commercially available from DuPont (Wilmington, Delaware).

[00239] By way of a non-limiting example, the typical properties of various types of TEDLAR SP materials are set forth in Table I, below:

TABLE I

	Test Method	0.5 mil Transparent Medium Gloss TTR5JAM9	1.0 mil Transparent High Gloss TTR10AH9	1.0 mil UV Screening High Gloss TUA10AH9	1.0 mil Colored High Gloss TXX10AH9
Tensile Strength	ASTM D882-80 Method A-100%	34 Mpa (5 kpsi)	41 Mpa (6 kpsi)	41 Mpa (6 kpsi)	34 Mpa (5 kpsi)
Elongation (Ultimate)	ASTM D882-80	175%	200%	200%	100%
Tear Strength, MD	ASTM D1004, Graves	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)
Tear Strength, TD	ASTM D1004, Graves	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)	550 kN/m (212 g/mil)
Unit Weight	ASTM D-1505-68	17.5 g/m ²	35 g/m ²	42-46 g/m ²	34-43 g/m ²
Coefficient of Friction Film/Metal	ASTM D1894	----	0.21	----	----
Falling Sand Abrasion	ASTM D968	----	234	----	----
Moisture Absorption	ASTM D570	----	0.5	----	----
Moisture Vapor Transmission	ASTM E96E-80	----	30	----	----
Refractive Index	ASTM D542-50	----	1.46	----	----
Gloss 85°	Gardner	31	93	93	93
Gloss 60°	Gardner	27	81	81	81
Gloss 20°	Gardner	6	57	57	57
Haze, Internal	Gardner	2	0.6	1.7	----
Haze, Total	Gardner	33	2.6	1.4	----

[00240] By way of a non-limiting example, the typical thermal properties of various films of TEDLAR SP material are set forth in Table II, below:

TABLE II

	Test Method	0.5 mil Transparent Medium Gloss TTR5JAM9	1.0 mil Transparent High Gloss TTR10AH9	1.0 mil UV Screening High Gloss TUA10AH9	1.0 mil Colored High Gloss TXX10AH9
Linear Coefficient of Expansion, MD	D696-79	----	9×10^{-5} m	----	----
Linear Coefficient of Expansion, TD	D696-79	----	9×10^{-5} m	----	----
Shrinkage, Max.	ASTM D1204-78	2% at 170°C	2% at 170°C	2% at 170°C	2% at 170°C
Specific Heat	DuPont 990	----	0.24 cal/g.°C	----	----
		----	1.01 kJ/kg. °K	----	----
Temperature Range					
Continuous Use		-72 to 107°C	-72 to 107°C	-72 to 107°C	-72 to 107°C
Short Cycle		Up to 175°C	Up to 175°C	Up to 175°C	Up to 175°C

[00241] Referring to Fig. 2, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, it is intended that support film 10 be releaseably secured to a substrate 12, such as but not limited to plastic materials, such as thermoplastics, thermosets, and combinations thereof. It should be appreciated that multiple substrate layers may be employed in the practice of the present invention. By way of a non-limiting example, additional substrates,

such as but not limited to thermoplastic olefins (TPO), may be adhered to the back surface of substrate 12, for example, by way of injection molding. By way of a non-limiting example, substrate 12 may have a thickness in the range of about 0.0015 inches to about 0.5 inches, and more preferably about 0.06 to about 0.25 inches.

[00242] Referring to Fig. 2A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to substrate 12.

[00243] Referring to Fig. 3, support film 10 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of substrate 12, e.g., either after deposition thereon or after processing, e.g., thermoforming.

[00244] Without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, an intended use of support film 10 is to aid in the thermoforming of substrates 12 (e.g., a polymeric material such as thermosets or thermoplastics), such as but not limited to thick film sheets of plastic materials, as generally shown in Fig. 2. The resulting system structure (i.e., support film 10 and substrate 12) can then be subjected to a thermoforming process, e.g., to form a contoured automotive component. After completion of the thermoforming process, support film 10 can then be selectively removed from the surface of the underlying substrate 12, exposing the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 3.

[00245] In accordance with a first alternative embodiment of the present invention, an alternative support film 110 is provided, as generally shown in Fig. 4.

[00246] By way of a non-limiting example, the alternative support film 110 is preferably comprised of ethylene-tetrafluoroethylene materials (ETFE), such as but not limited to

TEFZEL, an ETFE material readily commercially available from DuPont (Wilmington, Delaware).

[00247] By way of a non-limiting example, the typical mechanical and thermal properties of a film of TEFZEL material are set forth in Table III, below:

TABLE III

Property	Test Method (ASTM)	Typical Value	
		SI Units (Machine Direction/Transverse Direction)	English Units (Machine Direction/Transverse Direction)
Tensile Strength at Break	D-882	234/48 Mpa	34,000/7,000 psi
Elongation at Break	D-882	45/650%	45/650%
Elastic Modulus	D-882	73,500/900 Mpa	500,000/130,000 psi
Tensile Creep (3,000 psi/1000 hr)	----	0.8/8.0%	0.8/8.0%
Tear Strength (Propagating)	D-1922	10.5/2.3 N	2.3/0.5 lb
Impact Resistance	D-3420B	66J/mm	14.8 in-lb/mil
Melt Point	DTA	270°C	520°F
Service Temperature (Continuous)	----	150°C	300°F
Oxygen Index	D-2863	30%	30%
Dimensional Stability – Type M 105°C (221°F) 150°C (302°F)	DuPont	4.0/1.2% 4.0/1.2%	1.0/1.2% 1.0/1.2%
Shrinkable 200°C (392°F) (Heat Shrink Type)	----	23/7%	23/7%

[00248] Another ETFE material is marketed under the trade name AFLEX, and is readily commercially available from Asahi Glass Company, Ltd. (Tokyo, Japan). By way of a non-limiting example, the typical properties of a film of AFLEX material are set forth in Table IV, below:

TABLE IV

Property	ASTM	Conditions	Value
Specific gravity	D-792	----	1.70-1.76
Refractive Index	D-542	Np	1.40
Absorption	D-570	24 hours	<0.1 %
Molding shrinkage	----	----	0.02-0.03
Contact angle	----	Water	96°
Coefficient of linear expansion	D-69	23-60°C	(5-9) X 10E-4 1/°K
Melting point	----	----	500°F
Melting viscosity	----	300-330°C	10E-4 1.00E-05 Poise
Maximum continuous temperature	----	----	302°F
Tensile strength	D-638	73°F	5.8-7.0 Kpsi
Elongation	D-638	73°F	34%
Tensile modulus	D-638	73°F	71-110 Kpsi
Flexural modulus	D-790	73°F	128-199 Kpsi
Impact test	D-256	73°F Izod	No break Ft-lb/in
Hardness	D-638	Durometer	Shore D75

[00249] Referring to Fig. 5, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, it is intended that the alternative support film 110 be releaseably secured to a substrate 12, such as but not limited to plastic materials, such as thermoplastics, thermosets, and combinations thereof.

[00250] Referring to Fig. 5A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to substrate 12.

[00251] It should be appreciated that support films 10, 10', 110, 110' may be used in any number of combinations when two-support film systems are employed in conjunction with the present invention.

[00252] Referring to Fig. 6, the alternative support film 110 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of substrate 12, e.g., either after deposition thereon or after processing, e.g., thermoforming. It should be appreciated that the alternative support film 110 can be used in the same general manner as support film 10, as previously described (e.g., in connection with the thermoforming of polymeric materials).

[00253] In accordance with a second alternative embodiment of the present invention, support film 10 can be used in conjunction with a release film 14, as shown generally in Fig. 7. An optional bonding material, such as an acrylic adhesive, can be employed between the two respective films to promote adhesion to one another.

[00254] By way of a non-limiting example, release film 14 can be bonded, fused, or otherwise adhered to support film 10, either before or during the time when support film 10/release film 14 system is brought into contact with substrate 12 to form a support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system, as shown generally in Fig. 8.

[00255] Referring to Fig. 8A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to release film 14 and substrate 12.

[00256] Release film 14 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of substrate 12, e.g., either after deposition thereon or after processing, e.g., thermoforming, as generally shown in Fig. 9. In this manner, support film 10/release film 14

system can be more easily removed from the surface of substrate 12 after completion of the thermoforming process, as generally shown in Fig. 9.

[00257] Release film 14 is preferably thermoformable, in that it is suitable for use with conventional thermoforming techniques. In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, release film 14 is preferably comprised of a polymeric material having a tensile strength less than 0.5 pli at 300°F. By way of a non-limiting example, release film 14 can be comprised of polyurethanes and blends thereof, including water-based urethanes and blends thereof, and the like. By way of a non-limiting example, release film 14 may have a thickness in the range of about 0.00025 inches to about .0005 inches. However, it should be appreciated that release films having a thickness outside of these ranges can be used in the practice of the present invention.

[00258] By way of a non-limiting example, release film 14 of the present invention will be especially useful for the production of thermoformed articles, for example, interior/exterior automobile components, such as body panels. By way of another non-limiting example, release film 14 of the present invention will be especially useful for the production of contoured articles, for example, interior/exterior automobile components, such as body panels.

[00259] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, support film 10 and release film 14 have a combined tensile strength greater than 0.5 pli at 300°F, more preferably in the range of greater than 0.5 pli to about 1.6 pli or greater at 300°F, and still more preferably in the range of about 0.75 pli to about 1.0 pli or greater.

[00260] In accordance with a third alternative embodiment of the present invention, an alternative release film 114 is provided for use in conjunction with support film 10, as generally shown in Fig. 10. As with the embodiment depicted in Figs. 7-9, the alternative

release film 114 functions in substantially the same manner. By way of a non-limiting example, alternative release film 114 can be bonded, fused, or otherwise adhered to support film 10, either before or during the time when support film 10/release film 14 system is brought into contact with substrate 12 to form a support film 10/alternative release film 114/substrate 12 system, as shown generally in Fig. 11.

[00261] Referring to Fig. 11A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to alternative release film 114 and substrate 12.

[00262] Further, the alternative release film 114 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of substrate 12, e.g., either after deposition thereon or after processing, e.g., thermoforming, as generally shown in Fig. 12. In this manner, support film 10/alternative release film 114 system can be more easily removed from the surface of substrate 12 after completion of the thermoforming process, as generally shown in Fig. 12. By way of a non-limiting example, polypropylenes, and blends thereof, marketed under the trade name BICOR (ExxonMobil, Houston, Texas) can be used as an alternative release film 114.

[00263] It should be appreciated that the previously described support films and alternative forms thereof can be combined in several combinations with the previously described release films and alternative forms thereof.

[00264] By way of a non-limiting example, alternative support film 110 can be used in conjunction with release film 14 (as generally shown in Figs. 13-15), in accordance with a fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the alternative support film 110/release film 14 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments. In this manner, alternative support film 110/release film 14

system can be more easily removed from the surface of substrate 12 after completion of the thermoforming process, as generally shown in Fig. 15.

[00265] Referring to Fig. 14A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to release film 14 and substrate 12.

[00266] By way of another non-limiting example, alternative support film 110 can be used in conjunction with alternative release film 114 (as generally shown in Figs. 16-18), in accordance with a fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the alternative support film 110/alternative release film 114 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments, especially that shown in Figs. 13-15. In this manner, alternative support film 110/alternative release film 114 system can be more easily removed from the surface of substrate 12 after completion of the thermoforming process, as generally shown in Fig. 9.

[00267] Referring to Fig. 17A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to alternative release film 114 and substrate 12.

[00268] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, support film 10, and alternatives thereof, can be applied with a surfacing film system 16, e.g., to substrate 12, especially during an extrusion process. Without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, the intended purpose of surfacing film system 16 is to impart a surface effect (e.g., paint or color simulation) onto a surface of substrate 12, such as but not limited to an automotive component.

[00269] By way of a non-limiting example, surfacing film system 16 of the present invention can be comprised of a decorative layer (e.g., paint, ink, or other colorant), an optional adhesive layer (e.g., a heat-activated adhesive), an optional scratch resistant top clear coat layer, and an optional removable casting base (e.g., a polyester-based sheet). These types of surfacing film systems, also referred to as paint or color-containing films, are readily commercially available from Avery Dennison Corp. (Pasadena, California), Soliant, L.L.C. (Lancaster, South Carolina) and Dorrie International (Farmington Hills, Michigan). These films are generally available in a wide range of colors, including solid metallic colors, and are primarily used in a number of automotive applications. It should be appreciated that other types of paint or color-containing films can be used in the practice of the present invention, as well.

[00270] Additionally, surfacing film system 16 of the present invention can be comprised of a mold-in-color (MIC) film. One particular MIC film currently being used is a MIC ionomer film readily commercially available from Mayco Plastics, Inc. (Sterling Heights, Michigan) under the trade name FORMION. The MIC ionomer film typically consists of 4 discrete layers with a back molded thermoplastic polyolefin substrate. The layers typically consist of a clear ionomer layer, a colored ionomer layer, an adhesive layer, and a backing layer.

[00271] Referring to Fig. 19, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, it is intended that surfacing film system 16 is to be applied to a surface of substrate 12, in accordance with a sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention. Preferably, surfacing film system 16 is permanently adhered to substrate 12.

[00272] Referring to Fig. 19A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to surfacing film system 16 and substrate 12.

[00273] Referring to Fig. 20, support film 10 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of surfacing film system 16, e.g., either after deposition thereon or after processing, e.g., thermoforming.

[00274] It should be appreciated that the previously described support films and alternative forms thereof can be combined in several combinations with the previously described surfacing film systems and alternative forms thereof.

[00275] By way of a non-limiting example, alternative support film 110 can be used in conjunction with surfacing film system 16 (as generally shown in Figs. 21-22), in accordance with a seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the alternative support film 110/surfacing film system 16 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments, especially that shown in Figs. 19-20.

[00276] Referring to Fig. 21A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to surfacing film system 16 and substrate 12.

[00277] In accordance with an eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention, support film 10 can be used in conjunction with release film 14 when applying surfacing film system 16, e.g., to substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 23. Preferably, surfacing film system 16 is permanently adhered to substrate 12.

[00278] Referring to Fig. 23A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to release film 14 and substrate 12.

[00279] Referring to Fig. 24, release film 14 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of surfacing film system 16, e.g., either after deposition thereon or

after processing, e.g., thermoforming. In this manner, support film 10/release film 14 system can be more easily removed from the surface of surfacing film system 16 after completion of the thermoforming process, as generally shown in Fig. 24.

[00280] It should be appreciated that the previously described support films, release films, and alternative forms thereof can be combined in several combinations with the previously described surfacing film systems and alternative forms thereof.

[00281] By way of a non-limiting example, support film 10 can be used in conjunction with alternative release film 114 when applying surfacing film system 16, e.g., to substrate 12 (as generally shown in Figs. 25-26), in accordance with a ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the support film 10/alternative release film 114/surfacing film system 16 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments, especially that shown in Figs. 23-24. In this manner, support film 10/alternative release film 114 system can be more easily removed from the surface of surfacing film system 16.

[00282] Referring to Fig. 25A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to alternative release film 114 and substrate 12.

[00283] By way of another non-limiting example, alternative support film 110 can be used in conjunction with release film 14 (as generally shown in Figs. 27-28), in accordance with a tenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the alternative support film 110/release film 14/surfacing film system 16 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments, especially that shown in Figs. 25-26. In

this manner, alternative support film 110/release film 14 system can be more easily removed from the surface of surfacing film system 16.

[00284] Referring to Fig. 27A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to release film 14 and substrate 12.

[00285] By way of still another non-limiting example, alternative support film 110 can be used in conjunction with alternative release film 114 (as generally shown in Figs. 29-30), in accordance with an eleventh alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the alternative support film 110/alternative release film 114/surfacing film system 16 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments, especially those shown in Figs. 25-28. In this manner, alternative support film 110/alternative release film 114 system can be more easily removed from the surface of surfacing film system 16.

[00286] Referring to Fig. 29A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to alternative release film 114 and substrate 12.

[00287] Occasionally, it is desired to dispose a primer film 18 (as generally shown in Fig. 31), such as but not limited to thermoplastic polyolefin primer films, to substrate 12 (as generally shown in Fig. 32), in accordance with the prior art. Preferably, primer film 18 is permanently adhered to substrate 12.

[00288] These combinations are sometimes referred to as "service parts." To fill service part requirements, there is a need for a plain (e.g., no surfacing films used) thermoformed (e.g., vacuformed) TPO parts that are molded from the same tooling systems that produces the

same current original equipment manufacturer (OEM) parts. The problem that occurs with these TPO service parts is that it sometime requires the use of special paint systems to get paint to properly adhere properly to these TPO parts. There are very few, if any, body shops or auto repair centers that would be able to correctly paint these types of parts.

[00289] Therefore, to eliminate the need for automotive OEMs to warehouse service parts of each color for each program or car line, a readily paintable TPO part capable of being painted using existing painting systems at most aftermarket auto body shops would be very much in demand.

[00290] The thermoformable (e.g., vacuformable) TPO/primer coat described herein has been designed to fill that void. This primer can be used as a monolayer on TPO-based materials or it can be used in conjunction with a support film if bag/sag/drape control becomes necessary due to mold configuration, sheet weight, and/or other considerations.

[00291] To achieve the production of these service parts containing a primer layer, it is preferred to use the support film 10 of the present invention, and alternatives thereof.

[00292] In accordance with a twelfth alternative embodiment of the present invention, support film 10 can be used in conjunction with primer film 18 when applying the primer film e.g., to substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 33.

[00293] Referring to Fig. 33A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 10, 10' can be releaseably secured to primer film 18 and substrate 12.

[00294] Referring to Fig. 34, support film 10 is preferably selectively operable to be removable from a surface of primer film 18, e.g., either after deposition thereon or after processing, e.g., thermoforming.

[00295] It should be appreciated that the previously described support films, and alternative forms thereof can be combined in several combinations with the previously described primer films and alternative forms thereof. Furthermore, release films, as previously described, can also be used in conjunction with the previously described support films, and alternative forms thereof, to apply the primer films and alternative forms thereof.

[00296] By way of a non-limiting example, alternative support film 110 can be used in conjunction with primer film 18 (as generally shown in Figs. 35-36), in accordance with a thirteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The intended function of the alternative support film 110/primer film 18/substrate 12 system is substantially the same as the previously described system embodiments, especially that shown in Figs. 33-34.

[00297] Referring to Fig. 35A, and without being bound to a particular theory of the operation of the present invention, more than one support film, and more preferably two support films 110, 110' can be releaseably secured to primer film 18 and substrate 12.

[00298] Regardless of which type of support film, release film, surfacing film system, primer film, or substrate is used, it is a fairly straightforward process to apply the various materials to one another in the requisite sequence and under suitable conditions and parameters to form a laminate product. The intended purpose of forming the laminate product is to enable a shaping process, e.g., a thermoforming process, to be performed thereupon to form a finished product, such as an automotive component, especially contoured automotive components.

[00299] The following extrusion, laminating, and thermoforming examples are merely illustrative in nature and can be modified without departing from the scope of the claimed invention. By way of a non-limiting example, optional rollers, coils, belts, guides, heaters,

coolers, cutters, control systems, and the like may be used in conjunction with the extrusion, laminating, and thermoforming examples set forth below.

[00300] Referring to Figs. 37-71, a single pass through lamination system is used to apply a material in a single stage to a particular substrate, e.g., prior to the thermoforming process. It should be noted that either one or more (e.g., two spaced and opposed) support films could be used in conjunction with the following examples.

[00301] Referring to Fig. 37, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a fourteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Support film 10 is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Support film 10 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202. Additionally, an optional selectively removable backing film (e.g., a polyester backing sheet) can be used with support film 10 such that support film 10 can be more easily spooled or coiled onto coil 202. Accordingly, as support film 10 is applied to either surface of substrate 12, the optional backing film can be removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 37A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00302] The support film 10/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in

Fig. 38. The support film 10/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/substrate 12 system.

[00303] Once the support film 10/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 39. The softened support film 10/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film 10/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00304] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10 adhered thereto (specifically the surface of substrate 12) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 40.

[00305] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, support film 10 can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 41. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00306] It should be appreciated that component C can be used in any number of applications, including but not limited to automotive applications. Additionally, it should be appreciated that although component C is shown as being substantially contoured, the present invention is equally useful for forming components that have substantial planar surface portions associated therewith, as well.

[00307] As previously noted, alternative support film 110 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00308] Referring to Figs. 42-46, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 are shown, in accordance with a fifteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 42-46 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 37-41, except for the use of alternative support film 110. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 42A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00309] Referring to Figs. 47-51, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with support film 10/release film 14 system are shown, in accordance with a sixteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 47-51 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 37-46, except for the use of support film 10/release film 14 system. Thus, both release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 51. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 47A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00310] As previously noted, alternative release film 114 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00311] Referring to Figs. 52-56, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with support film 10/alternative release film 114 system are shown, in accordance with a seventeenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 52-56 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 47-51, except for the use of support film 10/alternative release film 114 system. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 56. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 52A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00312] As previously noted, alternative support film 110 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00313] Referring to Figs. 57-61, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110/release film 14 system are shown, in accordance with an eighteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 57-61 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 52-56, except for the use of alternative support film 110/release film 14 system. Thus, both release film 14 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 61.

Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 57A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00314] As previously noted, both alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 can both be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00315] Referring to Figs. 62-66, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110/alternative release film 14 system are shown, in accordance with a nineteenth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 62-66 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 57-61, except for the use of alternative support film 110/alternative release film 114 system. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 66. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 62A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00316] As previously noted, it is sometimes desired to apply primer film 18 to substrate 12, as shown generally in Figs. 67-71, in accordance with the prior art.

[00317] Referring to Figs. 67-71, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with primer film 18 is shown. The steps shown in Figs. 67-71 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 37-41, except for the use of primer film 18. Primer film 18 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 71.

[00318] Referring to Figs. 72-131, a double pass through lamination system is used to apply materials in two stages to a particular substrate, e.g., prior to the thermoforming process. It should be noted that either one or more (e.g., two spaced and opposed) support films could be used in conjunction with the following examples.

[00319] Referring to Fig. 72, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a twentieth alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Primer film 18 is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Primer film 18 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202, with any optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Support film 10 is then applied to the surface of primer film 18. Support film 10 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 206, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 208. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 72A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00320] The support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in Fig. 73. The support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system.

[00321] Once the support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 74. The softened support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/primer film 18/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00322] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10 adhered thereto (specifically primer film 18) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 75.

[00323] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, support film 10 can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of primer film 18, as shown generally in Fig. 76. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00324] As previously noted, alternative support film 110 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00325] Referring to Figs. 77-81, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 is shown, in accordance with a twenty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 77-81 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 72-76, except for the use of alternative support film 110. Primer film 18 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 81. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 77A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00326] Referring to Fig. 82, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a twenty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Release film 14 is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Release film 14 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202, with any optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Support film 10 is then applied to the surface of release film 14. Support film 10 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 206, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 208. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can

be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 82A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00327] The support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in Fig. 83. The support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system.

[00328] Once the support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 84. The softened support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/release film 14/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00329] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10 and release film 14 adhered thereto (specifically substrate 12) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 85.

[00330] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 78. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00331] As previously noted, alternative release film 114 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00332] Referring to Figs. 87-91, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative release film 114 is shown, in accordance with a twenty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 87-91 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 82-86, except for the use of alternative release film 114. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 91. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 87A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00333] As previously noted, alternative support film 110 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00334] Referring to Figs. 92-96, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 is shown, in accordance with a twenty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 92-96

are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 82-91, except for the use of alternative support film 110. Thus, both release film 14 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 96. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 92A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00335] As previously noted, both alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00336] Referring to Figs. 97-101, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 is shown, in accordance with a twenty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 97-101 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 82-96, except for the use of alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 101. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 97A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied

from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00337] Referring to Fig. 102, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a twenty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Surfacing film 16 (e.g., a paint or color-containing film) is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Paint or color-containing film 16 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202, with any optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Support film 10 is then applied to the surface of surfacing film 16. Support film 10 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 206, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 208. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 102A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00338] The support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in Fig. 103. The support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system.

[00339] Once the support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 104. The softened support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00340] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10 adhered thereto (specifically surfacing film 16) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 105.

[00341] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, support film 10 can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 106. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 106. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00342] As previously noted, alternative support film 110 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00343] Referring to Figs. 107-111, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 is shown, in accordance with a twenty-seventh alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 107-

111 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 102-106, except for the use of alternative support film 110. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 111. Thus, alternative support film 110 can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 111. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 107A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00344] As previously noted, a combined support film 10 and release film 14 system can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00345] Referring to Figs. 112-116, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with the combined support film 10 and release film 14 system is shown, in accordance with a twenty-eighth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 112-116 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 102-111, except for the use of the combined support film 10 and release film 14 system. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 116. Thus, both release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 116. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the

second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 112A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00346] As previously noted, a combined support film 10 and alternative release film 114 system can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00347] Referring to Figs. 117-121, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with the combined support film 10 and alternative release film 114 system is shown, in accordance with a twenty-ninth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 117-121 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 102-116, except for the use of the combined support film 10 and alternative release film 114 system. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 121. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 121. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 117A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00348] As previously noted, a combined alternative support film 110 and release film 14 system can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00349] Referring to Figs. 122-126, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with the combined alternative support film 110 and release film 14 system is shown, in accordance with a thirtieth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 122-126 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 102-121, except for the use of the combined alternative support film 110 and release film 14 system. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 126. Thus, both release film 14 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 126. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 122A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00350] As previously noted, a combined alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 system can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00351] Referring to Figs. 127-131, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with the combined alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 system is shown, in accordance with a thirty-first alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 127-131 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 102-126, except for the use of the combined alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 system. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C,

specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 131. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 131. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 127A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00352] Referring to Figs. 132-156, a triple pass through lamination system is used to apply materials in three stages to a particular substrate, e.g., prior to the thermoforming process. It should be noted that either one or more (e.g., two spaced and opposed) support films could be used in conjunction with the following examples.

[00353] Referring to Fig. 132, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a thirty-second alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Surfacing film 16 is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Surfacing film 16 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202, with any optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Release film 14 is then applied to the surface of surfacing film 16. Release film 14 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 206, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 208. Support film 10 is then applied to the surface of release film 14. Support film

10 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 210, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 212. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 132A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00354] The support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in Fig. 133. The support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system.

[00355] Once the support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 134. The softened support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film 16/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/release film 14/surfacing film

16/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00356] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10 and release film 14 adhered thereto (specifically surfacing film 16) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 135.

[00357] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 136. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 136. Thus, both release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 136. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00358] As previously noted, alternative release film 114 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00359] Referring to Figs. 137-141, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative release film 114 is shown, in accordance with a thirty-third alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 137-141 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 132-136, except for the use of alternative release film 114. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 141. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 141.

Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 137A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00360] As previously noted, alternative support film 110 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00361] Referring to Figs. 142-146, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 is shown, in accordance with a thirty-fourth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 142-146 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 132-141, except for the use of alternative support film 110. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 146. Thus, both release film 14 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 146. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 142A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00362] As previously noted, both alternative support film 110 and alternative release layer 114 can be used in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes of the present invention.

[00363] Referring to Figs. 147-151, the steps in the extrusion, lamination, and thermoforming processes with alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114 is shown, in accordance with a thirty-fifth alternative embodiment of the present invention. The steps shown in Figs. 147-151 are substantially the same as those depicted in Figs. 132-146, except for the use of alternative support film 110 and alternative release film 114. Surfacing film 16 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 151. Thus, both alternative release film 114 and alternative support film 110 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 151. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second alternative support film 110' is spaced and opposed from alternative support film 110. For example, as shown in Fig. 147A, optional second alternative support film 110' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00364] Referring to Fig. 152, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Adhesive film 20 is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Adhesive film 20 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202, with any optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Clear coat/base coat system 22 is then applied to the surface of adhesive film 20. Clear coat/base coat system 22 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 206, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and

taken up by take-up coil 208. Support film 10/release film 14 system is then applied to the surface of clear coat/base coat system 22. Support film 10/release film 14 system is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 210, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 212. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 152A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00365] The support film 10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in Fig. 153. The support film 10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system.

[00366] Once the support film 10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 154. The softened support film 10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film

10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/release film 14 system/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00367] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10/release layer 14 system adhered thereto (specifically clear coat/base coat system 22) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 155.

[00368] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, release film 14/support film 10 system can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of surfacing film 16, as shown generally in Fig. 156. Adhesive film 20 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 156. Clear coat/base coat system 22 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of adhesive film 20, as shown generally in Fig. 156. Thus, both release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of clear coat/base coat system 22, as shown generally in Fig. 156. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00369] It should be appreciated that the foregoing example depicted in Figs. 152-156 can also be used in conjunction with alternative support film 110 and/or alternative release film 114.

[00370] Referring to Figs. 157-161, a quadruple pass through lamination system is used to apply materials in four stages to a particular substrate, e.g., prior to the thermoforming process. It should be noted that either one or more (e.g., two spaced and opposed) support films could be used in conjunction with the following examples.

[00371] Referring to Fig. 157, substrate 12 is extruded from extruder 200, in accordance with a thirty-sixth alternative embodiment of the present invention. It should also be appreciated that substrate 12 can be pre-fabricated, coiled onto a coil system (not shown) and uncoiled from the coil system during the lamination process, or can be in pre-cut sheet form. Adhesive film 20 is then applied to either surface of substrate 12. Adhesive film 20 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 202, with any optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 204. Clear coat/base coat system 22 is then applied to the surface of adhesive film 20. Clear coat/base coat system 22 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 206, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 208. Release film 14 is then applied to the surface of clear coat/base coat system 22. Release film 14 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 210, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 212. Support film 10 is then applied to the surface of release film 14. Support film 10 is preferably supplied from a supply coil system 214, with an optional selectively removable backing film being removed and taken up by take-up coil 216. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that an optional second support film 10' can be applied to the underside of substrate 12, such that the second support film 10' is spaced and opposed from support film 10. For example, as shown in Fig. 157A, optional second support film 10' can be applied from optional supply coil system 202', with any optional backing film being removed and taken up by optional take-up coil 204'.

[00372] The support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is then preferably placed in a frame (not shown for purposes of illustration) and taken to an oven system 300, preferably including an upper heating element 302 and a lower heating element 304, as generally shown in Fig. 153. The support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is preferably kept in the oven system 300 for a sufficient time and at a sufficient temperature to achieve the requisite softening of the support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system.

[00373] Once the support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is sufficiently softened, it is taken (in its frame) to a thermoforming system 400, preferably having a male and/or female mold surface formed thereon, as shown generally in Fig. 154. The softened support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is either brought into contact with the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, or alternatively, the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 is brought into contact with the softened support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system. Preferably, a vacuum force is applied during contact such that the softened support film 10/release film 14/clear coat/base coat system 22/adhesive layer 20/substrate 12 system is drawn onto the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400 to form a component C having a desired configuration.

[00374] After the thermoforming process is completed, component C, still having support film 10/release layer 14 system adhered thereto (specifically clear coat/base coat system 22) is removed from the mold surface of the thermoforming system 400, as shown generally in Fig. 160.

[00375] At this point, or at a later time if so desired, release film 14/support film 10 system can be removed from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of clear coat/base coat system 22, as shown generally in Fig. 161. Clear coat/base coat system 22 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of adhesive film 20, as shown generally in Fig. 161. Adhesive film 20 is permanently adhered to the surface of component C, specifically the surface of substrate 12, as shown generally in Fig. 161. Thus, both release film 14 and support film 10 can be removed simultaneously (as a single system) from the surface of component C, specifically the surface of clear coat/base coat system 22, as shown generally in Fig. 161. The component C can then be used immediately, or alternatively, be subjected to further processing, e.g., trimming, painting, coating, and the like.

[00376] It should be appreciated that the foregoing example depicted in Figs. 157-161 can also be used in conjunction with alternative support film 110 and/or alternative release film 114.

[00377] To determine the tensile (i.e., yield) strength of the various materials of the present invention, as compared to conventional materials typically used in thermoforming operations, INSTRON testing was conducted on several samples, as set forth in Table V, below. The samples were cut into 1-inch x 6-inch strips that were cut in the flow direction. The test temperature was 300°F. The crosshead speed was 20 inches per minute. The grip distance was 2 inches. All of the following measurements were obtained in the machine direction.

TABLE V

Sample	Yield Strength PSI (PLI)	Elongation @ Yield %	Break Strength PSI (PLI)	Elongation @ Break %	Break Result
Soliant 1 mil sample release film #1	245 (0.245)	25	>591 (>0.591)	>411	No Break
Soliant 1 mil sample release film #2	285 (0.285)	35.8	>693 (>0.693)	>419	No Break
Kurz 1 mil sample release film #1	371 (0.371)	34	>1678 (>1.678)	>418	No Break
DuPont (TEDLAR) 1 mil support film sample #1	819 (0.819)	41	>2097 (>2.097)	>402	No Break
DuPont (TEDLAR) 1 mil support film sample #2	788 (0.788)	45.3	>1573 (>1.573)	>412	1 of 3 Broke
Combined Soliant sample release film #1 and DuPont (TEDLAR) support film sample #1 (1.5 mil total)	625 (0.94)	47	>1630 (>1.630)	>418	1 of 3 Broke
Combined Soliant sample release film #2 and DuPont (TEDLAR) support film sample #2 (1.5 mil total)	613 (0.92)	51	>1534 (>2.301)	>419	1 of 3 Broke
DuPont (TEFZEL) 0.5 mil support film sample #1	2198 (1.10)	43.6	1701 (0.851)	217	Break
DuPont (TEFZEL) 0.5 mil support film sample #2	2602 (1.3)	52.5	2252 (1.126)	191	Break

[00378] To determine the bag/sag/drape characteristics of the various materials of the present invention, as compared to conventional materials typically used in thermoforming operations, testing was conducted on several samples, as set forth in Table VI, below.

[00379] The intended purpose of this testing was to compare the support that is offered to the substrate sheets by the support films of the present invention, as compared to

conventional release films and/or surfacing films. As previously noted, this support is important because over-bagging of the TPO sheets during the heating cycle causes the sheet material to become very difficult, if not impossible, to properly thermoform (e.g., vacuform). Over-bagging of the TPO sheet creates excessive amounts of material and an individual will have difficulty pulling or properly placing all of the sheet material on the mold face without getting wrinkles or webbing of the excess material.

[00380] The sheets were heated to two topside heats (surfacing film side) 340°F and 360°F because they generally represent the ultimate lower and upper heat ranges for obtaining the best results from the tested materials during the thermoforming process.

[00381] The sheets used were 24 inches by 24 inches by 0.150 inches and were loaded one at a time into a vacuformer rack (e.g., frame) which measures 24 ¼ inches by 24 ¼ inches outside and 21 inches by 21 inches inside.

[00382] The loaded rack was placed in the preheated oven and allowed to stay until the proper temperature was recorded on each sheet and film combination.

[00383] The sheets, after reaching the proper temperature, were removed from the oven and allowed to cool in the rack without thermoforming (e.g., vacuforming). After the sheets were allowed to cool, they were placed, one at a time, on a flat metal table with the bag or drape side of the sheet facing away from the table surface. A height gauge, equipped with a 15-inch arm, was used to establish the depth or height of the drape or sag for each individual sheet.

[00384] Using this procedure, the following data shown in Table VI was obtained:

TABLE VI

Sheet Temp. Surfacing Film Side	Sample Group #1 Drape (inches of sag)	Sample Group #2 Drape (inches of sag)	Sample Group #3 Drape (inches of sag)	Sample Group #4 Drape (inches of sag)
	Soliant (Fluorex paint or color-containing film #B04K2 Pewter/PRMCPO28) surfacing film only	Soliant release film and Soliant (Fluorex paint or color-containing film #B04K2 Pewter/PRMCPO28) surfacing film	Two-step DuPont (TEDLAR) support film/ Soliant release film/ Soliant (Fluorex paint or color-containing film #B04K2 Pewter/PRMCPO28) surfacing film	One-step DuPont (TEDLAR) support film/ Soliant (Fluorex paint or color-containing film #B04K2 Pewter/PRMCPO28) surfacing film
340°F	5.46 (see Fig. 164)	4.45 (see Fig. 165)	1.20 (see Fig. 169)	1.6 (see Fig. 168)
360°F	7.60 (see Fig. 162)	7.25 (see Fig. 163)	1.65 (see Fig. 167)	2.55 (see Fig. 166)

[00385] As the results in Table VI indicate, use of the support films of the present invention enhances bag/sag/drape characteristics of thermoformed articles, as compared to use of surfacing films (e.g., paint or color-containing films) alone or surfacing films (e.g., paint or color-containing films) in conjunction with release films.

[00386] In order to determine the gloss characteristics of the products produced in accordance with the present invention, testing was conducted after the samples were exposed to the heat during the thermoforming process.

[00387] Soliant manufactured the surfacing film used. The surfacing film was designated Fluorex paint or color-containing film #B04K2 Pewter/PRMCPO28 and was

laminated to the TPO sheets via hot nip rollers. The sheets, which measured 0.150 inches by 24 inches by 24 inches, were produced using an EQUISTAR Resin #PD951. The laminated sheets were split into four equal stacks.

[00388] Stack number one, designated sample group 1, contained sheets that were laminated with surfacing film only.

[00389] Stack number two, designated sample group 2, contained sheets that were laminated with surfacing film and then had the clear polyester film (casting base) removed and once again passed thru the hot nip rollers. At this time, a release film (0.001 inches thick) only was introduced to the upper most surface of the surfacing film.

[00390] Stack number three, designated sample group 3, contained sheets that were processed identically to sample group 2. In addition to this combination, the clear polyester (casting base) was removed from the release film and the sheets were once again passed thru the hot nip rollers. At this time, a layer (0.001 inches thick) of a support film comprised of clear TEDLAR film #TTR10AH8 manufactured by DuPont was laminated to the uppermost surface of the release layer.

[00391] Stack number four, designated sample group 4, contained sheets that were processed identically to sample group 1. In addition to this combination, the clear polyester (casting base) was removed from the surfacing film and the sheets were once again passed through the hot nip rollers. At this time, a layer of a combined release film (Soliant)/support film (DuPont TEDLAR) system was laminated to the upper most surface of the surfacing film.

[00392] The samples were thermoformed using a PLASTI-VAC PVI XTX Series vacuum former Model #P406XTX. The sample vacuum mold that was used for this test measured 18 inches by 18 inches by 6 inches deep. On the face of this male mold there were

three plaques measuring 4 inches by 12 inches by 1/2 inches high. These plaques were spaced one inch apart and centered on the mold face. The plaques and mold were constructed of solid aluminum plates. The plaques were slightly textured (using medium grit sand – 400 grit) to help eliminate air entrapment.

[00393] Prior to the sheets being loaded into the clamp frame of the vacuum former, the casting base (clear polyester) was removed and discarded. On each sheet, a device was located to record the heat applied to either side of the sheets that were vacuum formed one at a time. The heat recording device was an adhesive-backed eight temperature THERMOLABEL temperature sensitive tape #TL-8-290 produced by Paper Thermometer Inc. These tapes record heats between 290°F and 360°F in 10° increments. For higher temperature readings, #TL-8-330 labels were used which record heats between 330°F and 400°F also in 10° increments. These heat tapes were placed in the same location (top and bottom) on each sheet to record heats applied to the surfaces.

[00394] Vacuum forming of the sheets from each sample group was carried out at 330°F, 340°F, 350°F, 360°F, 370°F, and 380°F. Both top and bottom side heat tapes were recorded; however, the heats recorded on the top or surfacing film side are most important when relating to gloss. With this in mind, all the heat ranges recorded below are from topside heat tapes. Gloss levels were taken from the center of each 4-inch by 12-inch plaque. This resulted in three readings per vacuformed sample (i.e., three 4 inch by 12 inch plaques per sheet) that were averaged to give one reading per vacuformed sample for each heat range.

[00395] Gloss levels were taken using a Micro TRI gloss hand held glossmeter, in 60° mode, which was manufactured by BYK-Gardner Inc. (Germany). Sixty degrees gloss measurements are generally regarded as the standard used by the automotive industry for exterior

Painted parts. Masking films were removed from sample groups 2, 3 and 4 prior to having gloss levels measured. The results are set forth in Table VII, below:

TABLE VII

Surfacing film side (topside) heat	Sample Group 1, Gloss Level at 60°	Sample Group 2, Gloss Level at 60°	Sample Group 3, Gloss Level at 60°	Sample Group 4, Gloss Level at 60°
330°F	70.3	71.6	77.3	80.5
340°F	51.0	67.9	77.8	77.7
350°F	34.1	67.3	79.1	77.1
360°F	32.1	66.7	78.5	76.7
370°F	27.8	61.9	67.1	72.0
380°F	27.8	56.3	62.9	71.5

[00396] As the results in Table VII indicate, use of the support films of the present invention enhances gloss level characteristics of thermoformed articles, as compared to use of surfacing films (e.g., paint or color-containing films) alone or surfacing films (e.g., paint or color-containing films) in conjunction with release films.

[00397] An additional testing procedure was performed in the same manner as described above, however the only difference in this procedure involved the use of a different paint film. The particular paint film was manufactured by Avery and given the designation Torch Red (AL 10366G3.57).

[00398] Stack number five, designated sample group 5, contained sheets that were laminated with surfacing film only.

[00399] Stack number six, designated sample group 6, contained sheets that were laminated with surfacing film and then had the clear polyester film (casting base) removed and once again passed thru the hot nip rollers. At this time, a release film (0.001 inches thick) only was introduced to the upper most surface of the surfacing film.

[00400] Stack number seven, designated sample group 7, contained sheets that were processed identically to sample group 6. In addition to this combination, the clear polyester (casting base) was removed from the release film and the sheets were once again passed thru the hot nip rollers. At this time, a layer (0.001 inches thick) of a support film comprised of clear TEDLAR film #TTR10AH8 manufactured by DuPont was laminated to the uppermost surface of the release layer.

[00401] Stack number eight, designated sample group 8, contained sheets that were processed identically to sample group 5. In addition to this combination, the clear polyester (casting base) was removed from the surfacing film and the sheets were once again passed through the hot nip rollers. At this time, a layer of a combined release film (Soliant)/support film (DuPont TEDLAR) system was laminated to the upper most surface of the surfacing film.

[00402] Gloss levels were taken using a Micro TRI gloss hand held glossmeter, in both 20° and 60° modes. Masking films were removed from sample groups 6, 7 and 8 prior to having gloss levels measured. The results are set forth in Table VIII, below:

TABLE VIII

Sample Group and Gloss Mode	Gloss Level at 330°F	Gloss Level at 340°F	Gloss Level at 350°F	Gloss Level at 360°F	Gloss Level at 370°F	Gloss Level at 380°F
5 @ 20°	41.5	45.43	50.6	47.1	46.83	NA
5 @ 60°	73.8	71.37	72	72.8	72.8	NA
6 @ 20°	56.86	62.2	62.67	62.9	60.23	NA
6 @ 60°	73.47	69.1	74.27	71.5	74.56	NA
7 @ 20°	64.7	62.7	63.4	62	58.74	60.63
7 @ 60°	75.7	74.5	74.7	74.9	74.27	73.27
8 @ 20°	62.46	63.33	63.73	63.7	61.93	60.8
8 @ 60°	73.77	75.1	75.17	76.1	73.27	75.43

[00403] Although the results in Table VIII may indicate that the various samples had similar gloss levels readings, especially in the 60° mode, there were significant qualitative and quantitative differences that indicated that the samples prepared in accordance with the support films of the present invention yielded superior results, especially with respect to surface roughness characteristics. Microscopic analysis of various portions of the surfaces of the samples revealed differences in mean roughness (of the surface) as well as surface area difference. Mean roughness is generally defined as the average roughness calculated by the average deviation of elevation values from the mean line or center plane (corrected for tilt). A higher mean roughness measure typically means a rougher (i.e., less smooth) surface. Surface area difference is generally defined by the equation: $\{[(\text{actual area of the surface})/(\text{measurement area in xy plane})] - 1\} \times 100\%$. A lower surface area difference percentage typically means a less rough (i.e., smoother) surface. This data is set forth in Table IX , below:

TABLE IX

Sample Group	Mean Roughness (nm)	Surface Area Difference (%)
5	15-30	0.50-0.56
6	6.3-18.8	0.16-0.18
7	11.1-13.6	0.19-0.21
8	6.4-17.2	0.09-0.14

[00404] Thus, the samples prepared in accordance with the support films of the present invention, e.g., Sample Groups 7 and/or 8, generally had superior mean roughness and/or surface area difference values than Sample Groups 5 and/or 6.

[00405] Those skilled in the art can now appreciate from the foregoing description that the broad teachings of the present invention can be implemented in a variety of forms. Therefore, while this invention has been described in connection with particular examples thereof, the true scope of the invention should not be so limited, since other modifications will become apparent to the skilled practitioner upon a study of the drawings, specification and following claims.